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ABSTRACT

The Toronto Board of Education's "Change Your Future" program started in spring 1991, targeting at-risk students belonging to racial minorities. The interventions took the form of group meetings and individual counseling by the "Change Your Future" counselor. The program took place in the Toronto Board over 2 school years (1991-1993) but because in each year the program took place in different schools with different students, it was essentially two separate 1-year intervention programs. Evaluation of the first 2 years relied on tracking students to determine dropout and transfer rates, determining grades and credit accumulation, questionnaires from students and teachers, conducting focus groups with program students, and interviews with program contact persons. At-risk factors faced by these students, who are predominantly black, were well-documented. Academic outcomes from the program allow for cautious optimism, with students in year 2 showing greater credit accumulation. Only 9 percent of program students dropped out, compared with 19 percent of nonprogram groups. The transfer rates for program students were also lower. Students' attitudes toward the program, as revealed in questionnaires and focus groups, were generally positive. Teachers in the Year 2 study did not appear knowledgeable of the program and because of this, they could not say to what extent the program made a difference in the student's participation in school. Three tables and one figure illustrate the discussion. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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1991-1993

No. 208

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A Two-Year Evaluation of the Change Your Future Program at the Toronto Board of Education

1991-1993

October 1994

Robert S. Brown

Executive Summary

Background

The Toronto Board of Education's *Change Your Future* program started its first year of operation in Spring 1991. The pilot program was one of seven initially funded by the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, Ministry of Citizenship with the support of the Ministry of Education and Training. Design and implementation of the Toronto program was by the Toronto Board, through an Advisory Council of the Board. The program targeted students belonging to racial minorities, who were considered to be at risk. The intervention took the form of group meetings and individual counseling by the *Change Your Future* Counselor. *Change Your Future* took place in the Toronto Board over two school years (1991-2 and 1992-3) but because in each year the program took place in different schools with different students, it was essentially two separate one-year intervention programs. (It has since continued into a third and now a fourth year, with a new group of schools.)

Research Services was requested to undertake an evaluation of the pilot program in its first two years. Instruments included tracking the students to determine dropout and transfer rates; marks and credit accumulation; questionnaires to students and to teachers; six focus groups of *Change Your Future* (CYF) students; and interviews with CYF contact persons (the liaison person between the CYF program and the school).

Results

At-risk Factors The many challenges faced by at risk students has been well documented. Within this context of what Freedman (1993) calls the "sobering realities" of at risk students, rather than a context of unrealistic expectations, the Toronto Board's *Change Your Future* program appears to be quite promising. The visible minority (mostly Black) students selected for the program were quite definitely at risk according to mark and credit accumulation criteria. Stress outside and inside school was a factor in the majority of these students' lives, according to questionnaire results. Attendance in classes was also a problem for many of these students.

They also, in questionnaire results, showed a degree of alienation or 'disengagement' from school. When compared to a sample of all secondary students who responded to the same questions (in the 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey), Change Your Future students were distinctly less favorable to school. They were less favorable to school than most at risk students, according to 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey responses.

Credit Accumulation Results of academic outcomes of Change Your Future students allow for cautious optimism about the program. There was no difference in credit accumulation between CYF and "comparison" students in Year 1, but CYF students did have a higher credit accumulation in Year 2. Both CYF and comparison students were still at risk according to their credit accumulation which, as noted above, is an important predictor of student success. However, the higher credit accumulation in Year 2 is an encouraging sign.

Dropout More important, perhaps, is the difference the program may have made in terms of dropout. When data from both years are combined, 9% of *Change Your Future* students dropped out during the school year, compared to 19% dropout for the two comparison groups. This is important because, with an average age of 17 years, many students were at a time when drop out would become a serious option. The 9% annual dropout rate, while somewhat higher than the Board annual average of 8%, was probably lower than the annual dropout rate for 'at risk' students.

Transfer Rate Transfer rate -- the proportion of students who transferred to another educational system-- is another sign of at risk status. The transfer rate of CYF students was 5%, less than half the 11% transfer rate of the two comparison groups (and slightly lower than the 6% transfer rate of all Toronto Board students)

Usefulness of the Program In questionnaires administered at the end of the year, students commented on what they found useful about *Change Your Future*. Nearly all students thought the

program was useful to them, and three quarters or more thought all major aspects of the program to be useful: employment skills, talking about school problems and problems outside of school, and discussing future career plans.

Focus Group Discussion During focus group discussion, students further identified positive characteristics of the program:

- the advantage of talking about many things, in a supportive group environment;
- the identification of the students with the CYF counselor;
- the ability to talk about personal problems and how they relate to school;
- the directions about what to do about school and jobs.

Although *Change Your Future* was technically not a mentoring program, these are related to characteristics that mentoring literature has identified as important to successful mentoring programs. A concern about the program raised by students and by CYF Contact Persons was a lack of time: it was thought that the CYF group sessions should be longer, or there should be more of them each week, or both. CYF Contact Persons thought that more time should be allowed for student interventions, that follow-up should be made more effective, and that the program should be more closely integrated with the school. This last point is pivotal because, in the long term, Change Your Future will be a successful as an integral part of a school, not as an "add on". As a result of this suggestion, the number of schools in Year 3 (1993-94) was reduced in order for the CYF Counselor and program to become more involved in the culture of participating schools.

As well, some students thought that teachers at times made it difficult to attend the CYF sessions. CYF sessions were structured so that, at most, two classes a month per subject were missed. It was argued by CYF organizers that the benefits of attending the program would, in the long run, outweigh the disadvantages of missing the classes. However, it may be that some teachers felt that CYF students (who often were not doing well in class) should attend their classes rather than CYF sessions.

Teachers For each CYF student, a teacher familiar with the student was requested to complete a short questionnaire. The teachers thought that 26-30% of students were likely to drop out. Yet, if practically all of the students in the program were considered to be at risk, the potential drop out rate would be much higher than 26-30%. It was apparent through questionnaire comments and suggestions that these teachers were very knowledgeable of their students and committed to them, so this was not a case of indifferent appraisal. It may be that teachers are aware that the student exhibits specific characteristics contributing to student dropout, but may not conclude from this that the student is at risk. Also, committed teachers who are trying to keep a student interested in school may find it difficult to conclude that unless there is improvement, the student will probably drop out of school.

Teachers in the Year 2 study were also asked what they knew of the CYF program. Most did not appear knowledgeable of the CYF program, and because of this, they could not say to what extent the program made a difference in the student's participation in school. Since the program was new to these teachers and the schools involved, this should not be considered surprising: establishing a 'profile' in a secondary school may well take several years. (For such results to continue beyond a pilot year would be cause for concern.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the academic outcomes and personal comments of CYF participants show the *Change Your Future* program in a positive light, considering the difficulties of at risk interventions in secondary schools . One proviso is that the program should not be relied upon as the only intervention. Research has shown that it is difficult for any one intervention to be conclusive--especially over a one year period. As one of several supports offered to visible minority students at risk, *Change Your Future* shows promise in the ability to make a difference.

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INTRODUCTION

The Toronto Board of Education's *Change Your Future* (CYF) Program started its first year of operation in October 1991. The Toronto Board's pilot program was one of seven initially funded by the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, Ministry of Citizenship with the support of the Ministry of Education and Training. Design and implementation was by the Toronto Board, through an Advisory Council of the Board.

Change Your Future targeted students belonging to racial minorities, who were considered to be at risk of dropping out of school. These students were usually referred by school staff (teachers and guidance counselors). Final selection was made by the school guidance counselors and the *Change Your Future* Counselor. The intervention took the form of group meetings and individual counseling by the *Change Your Future* Counselor. Initially, the program would include part-time work of under 15 hours a week, but that part of the program could not be instituted.[1]

The pilot program was scheduled for one school year, but funding was extended for a second. Most schools and nearly all students in Year 1 (1991-92) and Year 2 (1992-93) were different[2]. Therefore, each year was a separate intervention program.

Research Services was requested to undertake an evaluation of the pilot program in its first two years. Research instruments included:

A. Dropout and Return Rate (of students in program who returned to school)
- *Change Your Future* (CYF) students in both years were compared to a comparable group selected by guidance counselors in the participating schools

B. Student Marks and Credit Accumulation
-comparison with "Comparison" group selected by guidance counselors

C. Questionnaires for CYF students (but not Comparison students)
-administered in May/June 1992, and May/June 1993

D. Focus Groups of CYF Students
-group discussion with CYF students in six secondary schools, in May 1992 and May 1993

E. Questionnaires for teachers
-administered in May/June 1992, and May/June 1993

F. Interviews with Contact Persons (Year 2 only)
-telephone interview with CYF Contact Person (liaison person between the participating school and the CYF program).

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[1]Most CYF students participated in work during the summers of 1992 and 1993, as a result of funding extended by the province and, in the second year, through Toronto Board summer hiring. These elements were not part of the evaluation because they became available only after the end of the regular school years.

[2] In both years there was a similar range of both collegiate institutes (with predominately advanced-level students) and technical/commercial institutes (with predominately general-level students) throughout all three areas of the city.

RESULTS

1. Student Demographics

According to survey responses in Year 1, and student records in Year 2, students in the program were predominately male (55% in Year 1, and 62% in Year 2), with an average age of 17 years.

2. Returning Students

A computer search of participating *Change Your Future* students, and students in a comparison group was done in Fall 1992 for Year 1, and Fall 1993 for Year 2, to verify who returned to the Toronto Board system, and who had "dropped out" of the system. (The comparison group was a group of students chosen by guidance counselors in the schools, and the CYF counselor, based on their similarity to the CYF students in the school).

Year 1

Eleven percent of *Change Your Future* students (5 of 45) either "dropped out" in the 1991-1992 school year, or did not return to school in September 1992. (In addition, another 4 students, or 9%, transferred to another board.) In contrast, 22% of the comparison students (5 of 23) either "dropped out" in the 1991-1992 school year, or did not return to school in September 1992. (In addition, another 3 students, or 13%, transferred to another board.)

Year 2

Seven percent of *Change Your Future* students (5 of 69) either "dropped out" in the 1992-3 school year, or did not return to school in September 1993. (In addition, 2 students, or 3%, transferred to another school system). In contrast, 18% of comparison students (6 of 34) either "dropped out" in 1992-1993, or did not return to school. (In addition, 3 students, or 9%, transferred to another school system.)

The difference between CYF students and comparison students in Year 2 is similar to Year 1, in that CYF students appear less likely to leave the Toronto system than comparison students.

3. Student Marks and Credit Accumulation

Year 1

There were no substantive differences between Year 1 CYF students and "comparison" students in terms of average marks or credit accumulation.

	Change Your Future **Students** (N= 45)	**"Comparison" Students** (N= 23)
Average credit accumulation	4.1	4.2
Average marks (of completed credits)	59	61

Year 2

There were no differences between Year 2 CYF students and "comparison" students in terms of average marks.

However, there does appear to be evidence that the program did make a difference in terms of credit accumulation. *Change Your Future* students successfully completed, on average, 4.4 courses in the 1992-3 school year; student in the comparison group completed 3.2 courses.

	Change Your Future **Students** (N= 69)	**"Comparison" Students** (N= 34)
Average credit accumulation	4.4	3.2
Average marks (of completed credits)	61	62

Student credit accumulation is an especially important predicator of dropping out--students who are behind in their credit accumulation are much more likely not to complete their secondary diploma requirements (Brown, 1993). Credit accumulation of four credits per year or less in their early years of high school means that both *Change Your Future* and the comparison group are still at risk. Nonetheless, the fact that CYF students in Year 2 had a greater credit accumulation than their comparison group is an encouraging sign.

4. Student Questionnaire

Change Your Future students completed a questionnaire at the end of each school year (May/June 1992 for Year 1 students and May/June 1993 for Year 2 students). Comparison students were not given the questionnaire, since most questions pertained to the CYF program.

A. Source of Information About the Program

Guidance counselors were the most frequent source of referrals to the program in both Year 1 and Year 2, although in Year 2, a higher proportion of referrals came from outside the guidance department than in Year 1 (through school support staff or friends).

Table 1: Source of Information About *Change Your Future*

Source of Information	Year 1 number of students (%)	Year 2 number of students (%)
Guidance Counselors	14 (64%)	9 (43%)
Teachers	3 (14%)	1 (5%)
School Staff other than guidance counselors or teachers	3 (14%)	5 (24%)
Through friends	3 (14%)	6 (29%)
TOTAL	23 (100%)	21 (100%)

B. School Environment

Students in both Year 1 and Year 2 were asked questions about their school environment. There was some variation from one year to another: most noticeably, 27% of students in Year 1 said they were comfortable in school, while 57% of students in Year 2 said this. Such differences may be influenced by the comparatively small sample size; but perhaps more important is the fact that the students in Year 1 were in different schools from Year 2, and therefore may have very different experiences.

Still, it is clear that students in both years are ambivalent about their school experiences. Less than half believed

- they "belonged" to the school
- that most teachers at their school cared about their students
- that the school has an atmosphere than encourages students to learn
- that most teachers at their school made an effort to know their students.

For more detail, see Table 2 below.

Table 2: School Environment

Statement About School Environment	Change Your Future Year 1	Change Your Future Year 2
I feel comfortable in school	27%	57%
I feel lonely at school	9%	24%
I feel safe at school	59%	57%
I skip class frequently	19%	14%
I think some teachers treat me worse than other students	55%	52%
I get along with most of my classmates	55%	68%
I get along with most of my teachers	41%	57%
I am thinking of dropping out of school	9%	24%
I believe that most teachers at my school care about their students	27%	29%
I work hard at my school work	50%	38%
I feel I "belong" in this school	36%	29%
My school has an atmosphere that encourages students to learn	27%	19%
Most teachers at this school make an effort to know their students	23%	33%
This school treats students of all races and ethnic backgrounds fairly and equally	*	38%
My school gives students the help they need for planning their future education and careers	*	33%
Students at this school have enough say over the things that are important to them	*	25%
Extra help is available at school when I need it	*	67%

(Percentage who agreed with the statement) * Not asked in Year 1

One way of determining degree of disengagement of students is comparing attitudes on school environment expressed by *Change Your Future* students, with the attitudes expressed by all Toronto secondary students in the *1991-92 Every Secondary Student Survey* (Brown et al., 1992). Students in the Every Secondary Student Survey, and students in Year 1 or Year 2 of *Change Your Future*, were asked to what extent they agreed with seven questions on school environment. *Change Your Future* students were much less likely than Toronto Board students in general to agree with the statements. They were also much less likely to agree with these statements than students in the Every Secondary Student Survey who were at risk according to credit accumulation. An inescapable conclusion is that *Change Your Future* students are more alienated from school than other students in the system. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: *Every Secondary Student Survey* and *Change Your Future*
Responses to School Environment Statements

Statement About School Environment	1991 Every Secondary Student Survey	ESSS students who are 'at risk'	Change Your Future Year 1	Change Your Future Year 2
I feel I "belong" in this school	73%	67%	36%	29%
My school has an atmosphere that encourages students to learn	65%	60%	27%	19%
Most teachers at this school make an effort to know their students	66%	62%	23%	33%
This school treats students of all races and ethnic backgrounds fairly and equally	73%	73%	*	38%
My school gives students the help they need for planning their future education and careers	70%	67%	*	33%
Students at this school have enough say over the things that are important to them	50%	50%	*	25%
Extra help is available at school when I need it	81%	79%	*	67%

(Percentage who agreed with the statement)
* Not asked in Year 1

C. Stress

Students were asked whether stress was a factor in these students' lives:

- 82% of students in Year 1 and 81% in Year 2 said they were sometimes or always under a lot of stress in school;
- 78% of students in Year 1 and 62% in Year 2 were sometimes or always under a lot of stress outside of school.

D. Usefulness of the Program

All of the students in Year 1 and all but one student in Year 2 thought that *Change Your Future* was a useful program[3]. Here are a few representative comments:

Year 1

"It made me think not to drop out of school".

"It helped me to understand about myself and help me realize that there are others out there like me".

"The program makes you want to finish school and do well in life".

"It reinforced things I already knew, as well as gave me a look from various different perspectives."

"It put me on the right track".

"It helped to inspire and motivate me to do better in school."

"It builds up your confidence in yourself."

"Getting an outlet to my frustrations about school and even other things helped me to focus and make goals for myself."

"I have an outlet where I can ask and get help."

Year 2

"The only time that I get to say about what I strongly feel."

"We discussed situations and everyday things which we never did talk about usually."

"It helped with a lot of things (that) the school did not."

"I feel that *Change Your Future* tries to include every racial minority and encourages them to do better and to love themselves. It gives them self esteem."

"I think this program is excellent. It helps me think about the future and where it is heading."

"*Change Your Future* taught me how to get a job and make a resume."

"It was useful to me because it made me think more about college and university."

Three quarters or more of students in both years found all major aspects of the program to be useful to them: employment skills, talking about school problems, talking about problems outside of school, and discussing future career plans.

[3]This one student said the program was not very useful because in the later part of the year, the student did not get to see the CYF counselor as much as the student had earlier.

5. Focus Groups of Students

There were six focus groups held with CYF students: three in Year 1 and three in Year 2. Students in the Year 1 focus groups expressed advantages to the program in words very similar to those expressed by Year 2 focus group participants.

- *the advantage of talking about many things, in a supportive group environment*

  Year 1

  "The fact that I can talk about whatever interests me and we get to choose the topics, and even if that day, there is something we want to talk about, we could do so."

  "We share a lot of things. We talk about everything, it's like you find out...that you are not the only one in a bad situation and they can help you."

  "We would (usually talk) about racism, dreams that bother us, what we want to learn about. Just topics."

  "Sometimes only someone who has gone through what you are going through can understand. It is easier for me to talk about what's going on with me. I also like the fact that it's a smaller group, you don't have a big group of people, and it's easier for you to discuss certain problems. It gives you a chance to hear your feelings, and get realistic solutions and realistic information about what's really going on outside of the school. And it gives you a chance to get your head together, get your future straightened out."

  Year 2

  "You share your feelings and stories...trust each other more in this program."

  "People in the program you get to know and are more willing to open up to."

  "Everyone in here is very close and therefore it is easier to talk. Everyone is able to say what they want. This is a place where it is calm and relaxed. In class you are shy, but here you are related and able to talk freely."

- *the identification with the CYF counselor*

  Year 1

  "I can identify with her because she's a black woman too...I can see myself where she is. She makes me identify...because-- *I* could be that."

  "She knows what time it is."

  "Most of the things we are doing now in high school, she went through it and she shares her own experiences with us, so we feel comfortable hearing stuff from her and taking her advice and everything."

Year 2

"She's more like our psychiatrist. If we have a problem, we'll talk to her about it."

"(CYF Counselor) doesn't have that essence about her that she's higher than us. She doesn't think that because she's a teacher and she has an education...she treats us like we have an opinion."

"When we're trying to say something about her, right, she'll understand where I'm coming from."

"She'll help us when we ask her. And she'll try to help us when she sees us in some jam or something. But if we don't respond, then she's going to back off, she'll wait till we want to talk to her."

- *the ability to talk about personal problems and how they relate to school*

Year 1

"So far what the program has done for me is that I have come to realize that I can't let my problems outside of school interfere with my school work. So right now I'm doing much better, leaving all of that stuff behind me...to realize, that I have to just think of my work..."

Year 2

"This is the only time we are able to discuss things we want to talk about. We are free to discuss the problems about school."

"Problem solving-- (about) teachers, people. All of us have something in common."

- *the direction about what to do about school and jobs*

Year 1

"(The CYF counselor) told us that how our grades are now (will) effect what we want to be in the future, so we have to start working now...and we sort of realize that we do have to start working now. She showed us what we needed, because no one (else) really tells you...."

"We know that if we don't go to school, we don't get good grades and don't succeed. We know that. And plus we're told that every day, we're told that on TV, we see it everywhere. But for some reason (being told by the CYF counselor) makes a difference. If other teachers tell us this, so what, who cares."

Year 2

"We are able to talk about our future. We can discuss not only ours, but the rest of the group's."

"We are able to talk freely, for example, where do we see ourselves five years from now."

"Now I think about situations in the future."

"(The CYF Counselor) shows us how to do our resumes the right way."

- *The main concerns with the program* had to do with time: it was thought that either the CYF programs should be longer, or there should be more of them each week, or both. As well, some students thought that teachers at times made it difficult to attend the CYF sessions, and that if the CYF program was made a course, it would be much easier to attend sessions.

"We discuss a topic and we never get it finished because the time is short."

"I think we should have it more than once a week."

"I used to come here on a regular basis, (but) a couple of teachers told me that my mark is dropping, so I was forced not to come here for a while."

"Some of the teachers are really opposed to the program. Teachers will ask you why your are in the program."

"Maybe we could get some extra credits for coming here because we are missing classes, and we are learning stuff."

6. Teacher Questionnaire Responses

For each CYF student, a teacher with at least some experience in teaching the student was requested to complete a short questionnaire about the student. This questionnaire was completed at the conclusion of the school year.

A. Experience With the Student

Most Year 1 teachers (78%) had taught the CYF student for one semester or term only. Year 2 teachers had more experience with the students: a quarter of the teachers answering the questionnaire had taught the student for one semester or term only; the rest had taught the student for two or more semesters.

B. Likelihood of Graduation

- When asked how likely the student was to *drop out of* high school, Year 1 teachers responded:
  extremely likely: 13%
  quite likely: 13%
  not too likely: 65%
  not at all likely: 9%.

- When asked how likely the student was to *complete* high school, Year 2 teachers responded:
  extremely likely: 17%
  quite likely: 52%
  not too likely: 30%.

Thus, although the question was worded in a different direction from Year 1, it appears the same proportion of teachers (26-30%) thought the student would not finish secondary school; the rest thought the CYF student had at least a likely chance to graduate. There is something of a contradiction in findings, considering that the credit accumulation profile, and the student questionnaire responses, quite clearly indicate a majority of CYF students to be 'at risk' of dropping out.

C. School Atmosphere/ Student Appraisal

Year 1 teachers agreed that the CYF students were comfortable with school (65%) and got along well with their classmates (67%) but were rather ambivalent about other student characteristics. Less than half thought the student

- was confident in his/her abilities (48%)
- got along with his/her teachers (46%)
- worked successfully/well at school work (18%)
- was motivated in school (17%)
- worked hard at school work (12%).

Year 2 teachers also had a mixed appraisal of CYF students. Most teachers agreed that the students in that year got along with classmates (58%) and with teachers (55%). However, less than half agreed that the student

- was comfortable with school (48%)
- was motivated in school (26%)
- works hard at school work (19%)
- was confident in his/her abilities (13%)
- works successfully/well at school work (10%).

It is interesting that as noted earlier, most teachers in both Year 1 and Year 2 believed the student was likely to finish high school; yet most did not believe that the students exhibited characteristics important for scholastic success.

D. Knowledge of the CYF Program (Year 2 Only)

In Year 2, teachers were asked questions about their knowledge of the *Change Your Future* program.

- Most Year 2 teachers did not appear to be knowledgeable about the *Change Your Future* program. When asked how familiar they were with the student's involvement in the program, teachers answered as follows:
  very familiar: 3%
  familiar: 29%
  not too familiar: 23%
  not at all familiar: 45%.

- Likewise, most Year 2 teachers (86%) did not feel they could say to what extent *Change Your Future* made a difference to the student's participation in school.

7. Interviews with Contact Persons (Year 2 Only)

The project Research Officer and Assistant Research Officer interviewed the six Year 2 *Change Your Future* contact persons in June 1993. The method was a short (5-15 minutes) telephone interview.

Four of the six Contact Persons were in the Guidance Department, one was a Special Education teacher, and one was a vice-principal. Two had been involved in *Change Your Future* since its inception in 1991, the remaining four became involved in fall of 1992.

A. Role of the Contact Person

All Contact People described their role in similar 'administrative liaison' terms. There appeared to be three parts to this:

1. involvement in the original setting up of the program, especially in the selection of students, and introducing the program to the school;
2. contact between the counselor and the school staff and school committees/departments, and the scheduling of meetings;
3. a link with the students (reminding them of meetings, etc.).

> "Administrative liaison with counselors and staff/ school committees such as the Local School Team, etc.; linked principal with the program organizers; obtain support from school staff; smoothed out technical details e.g. scheduling, meeting locations, etc."
>
> "Introducing (the counselor) to staff, working with her in interviewing students, selection process for the kids; then, being school contact-- reminding kids about meetings, negotiating meeting places".

B. What Was Liked About the Program

Contact persons thought the program was useful:

> "an excellent mix of concrete tasks and dealing with social-emotional issues".
>
> "Overall, the program is successful; (the counselor) is well-liked and effective; the kids liked the program and would like it to continue."

C. Problems With the Program

All thought that the limited time taken by the program at each school seriously limited the effectiveness of the program, especially because the counselor was coming from outside the school e.g.:

> "The fact that she came just once a week and for one period: with these type of students, need more time and access to them to really benefit from it. Need more intensive intervention."
>
> "One hour every two weeks is not enough time to make a connection with the kids/school environment".
>
> "The format is not the best for the schools. Very difficult to integrate program, link the program with the school, when visiting only once a week-- continuity is questionable...(program is) almost operating in isolation."

D. Recommendations

Contact persons thought that more time at the school ("in a capacity as the Social Worker might have") would give more time for student interventions, increase the effectiveness of proper follow-up, and allow the program to be more closely integrated into the school.

> "Increase time of involvement of counselor. Also, counselor should be more involved with things going on in the school-- difficult if external."
>
> "If focus is more on [fewer] schools, get to know staff a lot better, get to know school better."

In addition,

- one Contact Person noted that there was a problem with keeping visible minorities other than Black students in the program, although that person could not really think of a way to remedy the situation.[4]
- one Contact Person, while stating that more time needed to be devoted to each school and program, also cautioned that people could become concerned about credits (because students leave on-going classes to attend the *Change Your Future* sessions).
- one was concerned that the process of identifying students in that school could have been slightly more effective if it were less hurried.
- one noted that due to space problems, it was very difficult to schedule proper meeting space.

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[4] The program was open to all visible minority students, but a majority of students in the program were Black.

SUMMARY-DISCUSSION

Background-- Research on At-Risk Students

Change Your Future is a program targeted for at risk students, and to examine the program it is first important to look at the characteristics of those students.

Between a quarter and a third of Ontario students who start Grade 9 will drop out of school before graduating with their Ontario diploma. However, this number is not distributed evenly among all groups. Research on Toronto Board students has tended to be consistent with other research on secondary student dropout. (Cheng, 1989; Fitzpatrick and Yoels, 1992; McCaul et al., 1992; Morris et al, 1991; Sullivan, 1988; Karp, 1988.) According to Brown (1993),

- Black students are more likely to drop out than White or Asian students;
- males more likely than females;
- students from lower socio-economic backgrounds more than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds;
- students living with one parent more than those living with both parents;
- students in the General academic level are twice as likely to drop out than those in the Advanced level, and those in the Basic level are thrice as likely to drop out as those in the Advanced level.

The most precise measure of calculating at risk status has been shown to be a students' credit accumulation. Under Ontario school regulations, students are expected to earn a total of 30 credits to receive their diploma. A majority of Toronto Board drop outs left in their fourth and fifth year of high school. Yet how students did in their first year (Grade 9) was pivotal to their later academic success. Of students who successfully completed 8 credits in Grade 9, 79% graduated. Of students who successfully completed 6 credits in Grade 9, only 33% graduated. Thus, students become at risk very early in their secondary school career (many have become at risk while still in elementary school)[5], although most do not leave until much later.

Other factors associated with 'at risk' students are grade failure (at the elementary and secondary level) and class attendance (at the elementary and secondary level) In fact, by the time students are *identified* as at risk, many have "disengaged" from school to such a degree that it is often difficult to reverse a process that may, in many cases, have been going on since elementary school. As well, there is some evidence-- in questionnaires completed by returning students at one Toronto school-- that students who dropped out were under a great deal of pressure both inside and outside of school (Brown and Henderson, 1993).

As a result, programs targeted at keeping at risk students in school are engaged in a constant uphill battle. For example, Laughrey (1990) in examining a Florida program

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[5]Flaxman et al. (1988) claim that "by third grade, misbehavior, truancy, and poor performance can usually identify a potential dropout".

aimed at Black male students at risk, notes that "actual success in dealing with the problem [of Black male dropout] and motivating the student has for the most part appeared ineffective." One can see this most readily in the literature on mentoring programs for at risk students. Over the past decade these programs (which involve 'pairing' an at risk student with an older student, teacher, or community adult) have become among the most popular school retention programs. However, more recent research has noted that, with many youth facing home, school, and community difficulties, mentoring is at best a modest intervention. (Flaxman et al., 1988; McPartland and Nettles, 1991). According to Freedman (1992), "although the testimony of mentors and others underscores the point that mentoring addresses real and profound needs, these needs are often so profound that mentoring can seem, in the words of one mentor, like a 'drop in the bucket'".

***Change Your Future* Student Outcomes**

Within this context of what Freedman calls the "sobering realities" of at risk students, rather than a context of unrealistic expectations, the Toronto Board's *Change Your Future* program appears to be quite promising. The visible minority (mostly Black) students selected for the program were quite definitely at risk according to mark and credit accumulation criteria. They also, in questionnaire results, showed a degree of alienation or 'disengagement' from school that is characteristic of students who are unlikely to complete high school. Stress outside and inside school was a factor in the majority of these students' lives, according to questionnaire results. Attendance in classes was also a problem for many of these students, according to questionnaire results. It was apparent that without some change, many if not most of these students would fail to complete their secondary education.

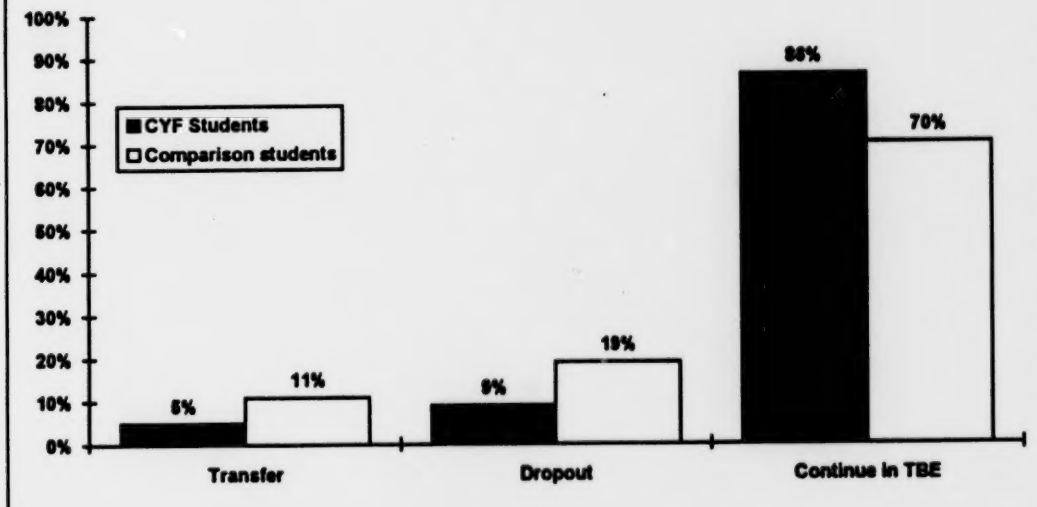
Change Your Future took place in the Toronto Board over two school years (1991-2 and 1992-3) but because in each year the program took place in different schools with different students, it was essentially two separate one-year intervention programs. Results of academic outcomes allow for cautious optimism about the program. There was no difference in credit accumulation between CYF and "comparison" students in Year 1, but CYF students did have a somewhat higher credit accumulation in Year 2. Both CYF and comparison students were still at risk according to their credit accumulation which, as noted above, is an important predictor of student success. However, the higher credit accumulation in Year 2 is an encouraging sign.

More important, perhaps, is the difference the program may have made in terms of dropout. When data from both years are combined, 9% of *Change Your Future* students dropped out during the school year, compared to 19% dropout for the two comparison groups. This is important because, with an average age of 17 years, many students were at a stage when dropping out would become a serious option. The 9% annual dropout rate, while somewhat higher than the Board annual average of 8%, was probably lower than the annual dropout rate for 'at risk' students.

Transfer rate -- the proportion of students who transferred to another educational system-- is another sign of at risk status. The transfer rate of CYF students was 5%, less than half

the 11% transfer rate of the two comparison groups (and slightly lower than the 6% transfer rate of all Toronto Board students).

Transfer, Dropout, and Continuation of CYF Students and Comparison Students



(Years 1 and 2 of the Program combined)

Student Appraisal of the Program

In questionnaires administered at the end of the year, students commented on what they found useful about *Change Your Future*. Nearly all students thought the program was useful to them, and three quarters or more thought all major aspects of the program to be useful: employment skills, talking about school problems and problems outside of school, and discussing future career plans.

During focus group discussion, students further identified positive characteristics of the

program. Although *Change Your Future* was technically not a mentoring program[6], many of the characteristics as identified by students were characteristics that the literature has identified as essential to successful mentoring programs. Among the key positive characteristics identified by six focus group discussions were:

- the advantage of talking about many things, in a supportive group environment;
- the identification of the students with the CYF counselor;
- the ability to talk about personal problems and how they relate to school;
- the directions about what to do about school and jobs.

The identification with the CYF counselor is particularly important. Mentoring research has repeatedly indicated that the most difficult element is a "match" between mentor and mentee. According to Flaxman et al.(1988), "more important than a personal match is how the social distance between mentor and mentee affects the delivery of resources. What is at stake here is the capacity of the mentor to empathize with the mentee, to identify the mentee's needs, and to provide small, workable steps in the achievement of a realistic goal". In this respect, students clearly thought that the CYF counselor "connected" with them.

The supportive group environment is also essential because research suggests that when mentoring and other intervention programs **work**, they are supplying psychological and social resources that are often not available to at risk students. To quote Flaxman et al. (1988) again,

> Highly advantaged people have redundant social supports and opportunities; if the family fails, other kin, peers, teachers, or employers supply the needed resources and fill the gap...Well-planned and sustained mentoring programs can provide the tenacious youth with resources available to the more advantaged, and can compensate for other deficiencies. Because such youth often have a patchy reservoir of social resources, the psychosocial and instrumental aspects of planned mentoring may be even more critical to their individual success than for others.

As well, it has been emphasized that programs work best when there is a specific structure, with concrete objectives. The directions given by the CYF program (through the counselor and support sessions) on what to do about school and jobs fit into the recommendation by Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) that

> Building competence is the most important goal for mentoring. Competence, the capacity to do something well, is a goal concrete enough that both mentor and protégé get a clear picture of what kinds of activities are likely to achieve it. Thus the purpose of their meetings become clearer. Moreover, our data lead us to conclude that warm interpersonal

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[6]Mentoring depends on the relationship between a mentor and a mentee, usually, although not always, on a one-to-one basis. *Change Your Future* had a Counselor and peer group discussions; both the Counselor and the peers had one-on-one interaction outside of the formal meetings. Therefore *Change Your Future* had more in common with mentoring programs than might appear at first glance.

relations are more likely to result from a focus on building competence than from a focus on building a relationship. The latter goal is simply too vague and open-ended.

Program Concerns

During focus group discussion, students also commented on their concerns about the program. The main concerns had to do with time: it was thought that the CYF group sessions should be longer, or there should be more of them each week, or both.

These concerns were related to suggestions given by CYF Contact Persons (the school liaisons with the program) in telephone interviews conducted in Year 2. All Contact Persons thought the program was useful. Yet all also thought the time (or lack thereof) taken for the program was a limitation, especially since the CYF counselor was coming from outside the school.

CYF Contact Persons thought that more time should be allowed for student interventions, that follow-up should be made more effective, and that the program should be more closely integrated with the school. This last point is pivotal because, in the words of Fullan (1991), "educational change depends on what teachers do and think-- it's as simple and complex as that". In the long term, *Change Your Future* will be successful as an integral part of a school, not as an "add on". As a result of this suggestion, the number of schools in Year 3 (1993-94) was reduced in order for the CYF Counselor and program to become more involved in the culture of participating schools.

As well, some students thought that teachers at times made it difficult to attend the CYF sessions. This second concern was raised in all focus groups. As a result, several students suggested that the *Change Your Future* program should be made into a credit course, which would give a more 'official' recognition to the program.

There may be a clash of philosophies between the organization of *Change Your Future* and the way some teachers reacted to students excusing themselves to go to class. These teachers appeared to think that CYF students (who often were not doing well in class) should attend classes rather than attend CYF sessions. Considering the well-documented relationship between class attendance and student achievement, this is not a frivolous concern. At the same time, CYF sessions were structured so that, at most two classes a month per subject were missed. It was argued by CYF organizers that the benefits of attending the CYF program would, in the long run, outweigh the disadvantages of missing the classes. However, since most teachers had limited knowledge of the CYF program (see below), it is understandable that some would be doubtful of CYF benefits.

Teacher Questionnaires

For each CYF student, a teacher familiar with the student was requested to complete a short questionnaire. The teachers thought that between 25-30% of students were likely to

drop out.[7] If practically all of the students in the program were considered to be at risk by the school, the potential drop out rate would be much higher than 25-20%. (Theoretically, *all* students who are identified as at risk could drop out.)

It was apparent through questionnaire comments and suggestions that these teachers were very knowledgeable of students and committed to them; this was not a case of indifferent appraisal. At least two interpretations are possible. First, teachers may be aware of specific characteristics contributing to student dropout, but may not conclude that the students are at risk even though they exhibit these characteristics.[8] Also, committed teachers who are trying to keep a student interested in the scholastic process may find it difficult to conclude that unless there is improvement, the student will probably drop out of school.

Teachers in the Year 2 study were also asked what they knew of the CYF program. Most did not appear knowledgeable of the CYF program, and because of this, they could not say to what extent the program made a difference in the student's participation in school. Since the program was new to these teachers and the schools involved, this should not be considered surprising: establishing a 'profile' in a secondary school may well take several years. (For such results to continue beyond a pilot year would be cause for concern.)

Conclusion

The academic outcomes and personal comments of CYF participants show the *Change Your Future* program in a positive light, considering the difficulties of at risk interventions in secondary schools . One proviso is that the program should not be relied upon as the only intervention. Research has shown that it is difficult for any one intervention to be conclusive--especially over a one year period. In fact, the recent history of education is replete with numerous cases of interventions that have been billed as "the" solution, only to fail due to unrealistic expectations. As Flaxman et. al (1988) state, "as we have learned in programs for many youth, particularly youth without substantial resources, there is no single essential intervention. One can only speak of multiple interventions working constructively in tandem." As one of several supports offered to visible minority students at risk, *Change Your Future* shows great promise in the ability to make a difference.

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[7]At the same time, in appraisals of the students on the questionnaires, less than half of the teachers agreed that the students exhibited characteristics important for scholastic success: confidence in his/her abilities, motivation in school, working successfully/well in school work, and working hard at school work.

[8] It should be noted that most CYF students did not think they were going to drop out of school (see Table 2). In this, both teacher and student appraisals were at odds with other criteria. There may be, then, a mismatch in knowledge or agreement of what constitutes "at risk" characteristics.

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